

# Preserving the unique legacy of SM Idris

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**THERE** is an old African proverb that says when a wise person dies, a whole library is burnt down. There can never be a better illustration of this than the recent demise of the legendary consumer-environment-people's (the list goes on) advocate, the late SM Mohamed Idris (1926-2019), fondly known as "uncle".

A rare gem with a very human and humane heart. He could relate to all, but only if the other party is equally concerned and sincerely so. "Uncle" will not have it any other way as clear as it is in the following quote: *"I do not seek any acknowledgement or praise for the work. It is a cause for bringing about change and improvement in society which should not be limited by one's own desire for fame or self-glorification."*

I knew "uncle" since I was a student in Penang. Who would not, when his name was synonymous with CAP – the Consumers Association of Penang, otherwise known as the defender of the people's rights. It is a household name where the rakyat went to in any confrontation with the powerful. That is how extensive the influence of CAP under the stewardship of Idris, who subsequently inspired the establishment of Sahabat Alam Malaysia (SAM), and the Third World Network (TWN). The three completed the circle making the combination a global nexus of repute.

As a student, to see such development emerging opened up lessons that were almost absent in the lecture halls especially for those doing sciences. It is devoid of the human essence making the subject boring (and we wonder why it is not attracting others to the discipline except in utilitarian ways).

As for the social sciences and humanities, they did not go far enough to articulate the local and traditional wisdom that Idris always came back to. In other words, our minds are still "colonised", setting their own limits disguised as "world class" education defined by someone else, somewhere for some other purpose.

Idris had long been critical of this and mooted decolonisation discourses which of late have caught on in other parts of the world, including the "Rhodes Must Fall" campaign in a UK university. In this sense, Idris was not only a bold leader (who called a spade, a spade), but was consistent in what he wanted in bringing about "real" changes without flip-flopping or apologising for it.

This is what made working with him a privilege (though demanding) because we knew what it was all about and what to focus on. As such the teamwork and synergy was phenomenal ensuring why NGOs like CAP under “presidents” like Idris are mission-oriented, resourceful and prudent. The rattan chair that was allocated to him is still there. It is due to the disciplined-way in preserving the precious little resources available for better use. Thus change is not the only constant as we are often told. Preservation too. This contrasted with how other organisations are “managed” – more on form instead of substance, which Idris abhorred.

So 50 years went by. Idris, in the same vintage as the prime minister, ably demonstrated how “simplicity” can lead the way to a better, more equitable and just world. If this sounds like “sustainable development”, do not be surprised. It may well be a Malaysian idea that can be traced to the CAP-SAM-TWN nexus. And finally, nestling as a brainchild of the visionary Idris.

News that Idris and a few friends were instrumental in breaking the palm oil cartel of the 60s has just surfaced. There are many more. But humble as he was, stories that tend to put him as the “star” performer were never encouraged. Now that he is gone, his legacy must be given a meaningful place. Not only for Penang to immortalise the name of SM Idris in the pages of its history, more importantly to tell the story as it is. It would not be too presumptuous to name a “citadel” after him, where his dreams can continue to inspire coming generations (as I was as a student), more so to nurture courageous and humane Malaysians who will not hesitate to come forward to further advance the cause of a truly just world.

Rest in peace, Uncle Idris. You more than deserve it. It is now our turn to make things happen as you have envisioned them. You will be sorely missed no doubt.